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ABSTRACT

Normal drinking patterns in an older population were examined by posing a series of questions directed at identifying drinking norms and practices, the social context and changes in alcohol use over time, and the ways individuals perceive alcohol and drinking. Instruments (N=3) were constructed: a schedule for structured personal interviews with both employed and retired persons; a self-report questionnaire for employed persons; and a self-report questionnaire for retired persons. The instruments were administered to a sample of 187 older clerical and sales workers and retirees residing in New York City. Chi square and analysis of variance procedures revealed that age, income, sex, and health status were strongly associated with the frequency and context of alcohol use. (Author)

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AGING AND ALCOHOL USE: A PILOT PROJECT

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The past decade has seen a burgeoning interest in alcohol use and abuse in the United States. During that time, the cultural mores surrounding alcohol consumption have undergone considerable scrutiny by researchers and public policymakers, and alcoholism has increasingly become recognized as a public health problem. As Bailey,[1] et al., have observed:

> ...A public health approach to a disease (such as alcoholism) leads to the hope of control, and ultimately prevention, through knowledge of magnitude, identification of vulnerable groups in the population, estimation of treatment needs and the discovery of etiological clues leading to further research.

An examination of the rapidly expanding literature on drinking patterns and alcohol abuse shows that little attention has been paid to the older problem drinker in America. In general, both service providers and social analysts have overlooked the problems and needs of older drinkers. Contributing to the neglect are such factors as research findings pointing to reduced drinking with age and to lower rates of alcoholism among elderly persons, along with the feeling of many practitioners that older abusers of alcohol are poor treatment risks.

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[1] Margaret Bailey, Paul Haberman and Harold Alksne, "The Epidemiology of Alcoholism in an Urban Residential Area," QUARTERLY JOURNAL ON STUDIES ON ALCOHOL, 1965, 26, p. 19.

Recognizing that ignoring the situation does nothing to benefit the nation's estimated one million older alcoholics, NCOA's research department sought and received funding from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) to conduct a pilot study of drinking patterns of older Americans. NCOA's intention was to examine normal drinking patterns in an older population. The focus was on normal rather than problem drinking; we felt this was a needed first step toward understanding the factors contributing to the changes in alcohol use that accompany the transition from middle to old age and from employment to retirement.

As part of the first step, the project posed a series of questions directed at identifying drinking norms and practices; the social context and changes in alcohol use over time, and the ways individuals perceive alcohol and drinking. Three instruments were constructed:

- a schedule for structured personal interviews with both employed and retired persons
- a self-report questionnaire for employed persons
- a self-report questionnaire for retired persons

COMPARE USE, FREQUENCY CONTEXT

All three instruments covered the same content areas: Frequency of current alcohol use; current drinking compared with drinking at age 50; reasons for decreased alcohol use or non-use; drinking contexts and perceived alcohol use among respondents' friends; leisure activities; health; income; life satisfaction; questions related to work and retirement, and demographics. The two forms of the self-report questionnaire (one for employees and one for retirees) were identical, except that the questionnaire's

final section included questions on work (employees) and retirement and certain income questions (retirees).

The instruments were administered to a sample of 187 men and women residing in New York. Of the respondents, 114 were currently employed persons aged 45 and older, and 73 were retired persons. Study participants, most of whom were union members, were recruited through the United Steelworkers. The workers' median age was nearly 61 and that of the retirees was 69. Most workers were married and living with a spouse. Over 40 percent of retirees were widowed, and one-third were married.

FREQUENCY AND CONTEXT

Most of the study's respondents consume alcohol to some extent. As Table 1 shows, 24 percent of the respondents reported drinking at least once a week; 28 percent drink at least once a month but less than once a week; 30 percent drink less than once a month. Sixteen percent reported they have either never used alcohol or once drank but no longer do so.

Respondents aged 55 and older were asked to compare their current drinking with their drinking at about age 50 (See Table 2). Fifty-one percent reported their current drinking about the same as at age 50; 28 percent drink less, and two percent drink more. Four percent reported other changes -- either that they once drank but stopped completely (3%) or had never used alcohol until after age 50 (1%).

A total of 51 respondents aged 55 and over reported they either were drinking less than at age 50 or had stopped completely. Their primary reasons for drinking less or for stopping were: "Afraid of bad effects on health" (41%); "never got into habit" (31%); "don't like the way it makes me feel" (12%). Eight percent indicated they stopped or cut down because they felt they were drinking too much. A third of the respondents volunteered other reasons for decreased alcohol use, mostly referring to changes in their social activity patterns.

ABSTAINERS

Lifelong abstainers and infrequent drinkers also answered the question concerning reasons for decreased alcohol use or non-use. Among respondents age 55 and older, a total of 56 could be classified as "lifelong non-drinkers." The group included respondents currently drinking less than once a month, with no change reported in long-term drinking practices, as well as the lifelong abstainers.

Reasons for non-use most frequently cited by "lifelong non-drinkers" were: "Never got into habit" (50%); "don't like the taste" (32%); "don't like the way people act when they drink too much" (21%), and "afraid of bad effects on health" (18%). Other reasons for non-use (e.g., "don't like the way it makes me feel") were checked by 11 percent or less of the lifelong non-drinkers. None checked that they had stopped or cut down, suggesting an internal consistency of respondents' answers.

A comparison of reasons for decreased use between those who had cut down or stopped drinking and lifelong drinkers revealed that the latter were more likely to feel that long-established patterns determined their current

behavior. They were also less likely than the decreased-use group to implicate health concerns. In addition, lifelong non-drinkers reported far more frequently a variety of other reasons for their abstinence, such as unappealing taste and its effect on others.

OCCASIONAL DRINKERS

Respondents who reported occasional drinking, even if less than once a year, were asked to indicate their frequency of drinking while participating in social and leisure activities ("usually," "sometimes," "very seldom" or "never," as well as of the frequency of drinking for those who participate in the activity). A total of 158 respondents reported at least occasional drinking. The situational contexts in which respondents were most likely to have something to drink ("usually") were: On special occasions, such as holidays or birthdays (49%); at parties or get-togethers (34%); at restaurants (29%), and in informal socializing (26%).

The majority reported either never being in the following situations or seldom or never drinking while in the situation: At bars or nightclubs; before or during regular meals at home; at sports events; while playing cards or board games; when going to movies, plays or concerts; while working around home; while participating in active sports; when at home not doing anything in particular; while watching TV or reading, and before going to bed.

FREQUENT USERS

From Table 3 data, it is apparent that frequent drinkers more often associate with other frequent drinkers; nearly half (46%) of the sample's frequent users reported several, most or all their friends drink nearly nearly every day compared to only 16 percent of the infrequent users and 34 percent of the current non-users with friends in this grouping. Responses

to the question on changes in alcohol use since age 50 indicate the majority of respondents have maintained rather than changed their consumption patterns over time. Among those 55 and over, reported changes in respondents' drinking patterns mostly concerned decreased intake.

As Table 4 suggests, the most frequent consumers of alcohol are younger than infrequent users or non-users and disproportionately male. Conversely, the infrequent users and non-users are predominately women and are slightly more likely to be in the oldest age group. The subsequent findings, that the heaviest drinkers are healthier and tend to report a higher degree of life satisfaction, may be the artifact of their younger age. Interestingly, in breakouts scored by the pattern of long-term use, the long-term regular users are disproportionately represented in the "somewhat dissatisfied" response to the general life satisfaction item.

The results of statistical tests on a measure of situations in which the respondents drink are shown in Table 5. Age, income, sex and health are strongly associated with situations in which respondents drink (Age, $F=3.3$; Income, $F=3.3$; Sex, $F=3.6$, and Health, $F=9.1$). Respondents who are younger, more affluent, male and in good/excellent health report drinking in the widest variety of appropriate social situations. This finding reflects both the number and range of social situations in which these respondents participate, as well as their level of alcohol consumption.

CONCLUSIONS

The primary findings of NCOA's pilot project on aging and alcohol use are:

- Most of the sample (88%) currently consume alcohol, but a minority (12%) report drinking three or more times a week.
- The most frequent consumers of alcohol are the sample's younger male members. Conversely, the infrequent users and abstainers are predominately women and are slightly more likely to be in the oldest age grouping.
- Most of the older respondents (51%) report their current drinking at about the same level as at age 50. Twenty-eight percent drink less now than when they were younger, while only two percent drink more. Whether the older respondent is working or retired appears to make little difference.
- Among the most frequent reasons for reduced drinking were alcohol's deleterious effects on health and well-being and the decline in frequency of social situations in which drinking is an expected activity. The latter reason was especially typical for the sample's retirees.
- In the sample, infrequent alcohol users report they may do some drinking on special occasions and at social functions.
- Frequent users report more friendships with other frequent users than with moderate or infrequent users or non-users. Conversely, infrequent users and non-users report most of their friends are other infrequent users or non-users.

- Health, work status and alcohol use are strongly associated with an index of leisure activity. Respondents in good health, retirees and alcohol users received higher scores on this index than did their less healthy, employed and abstaining contemporaries.

- Respondents who were younger, male, healthier and more affluent report drinking in the widest variety of social situations in which alcohol consumption would be appropriate.

Despite their preliminary nature, the findings do contain some patterns worthy of further exploration in any future project: (1) The effects of health, income, work status and sex differences on drinking and leisure use patterns; (2) the impact of long-established leisure use and drinking patterns on current behavior, and (3) the importance that the setting and expectations of others have on drinking patterns.

Once these effects have been established for a population of older normal drinkers, the etiology of abnormal drinking can be examined and placed in its proper context. The nature of both normal and abnormal alcohol use needs to be understood if policymakers, program administrators and service providers are to effectively serve the unique needs of older problem drinkers.

TABLE 1: FREQUENCY OF CURRENT ALCOHOL USE

	Percentage		
	Employees (N=114)	Retirees (N=73)	Total (N=187)
Three or more times a week	10	15	12
Once or twice a week	14	8	12
Two or three times a month	15	11	13
About once a month	15	15	15
Less than once a month . . .	28	35	30
No answer (drinks occasionally but frequency not reported)	2	1	2
Not applicable (never used or stopped completely). . .	16	15	16

TABLE 2: CHANGES IN ALCOHOL USE SINCE AGE 50
AMONG RESPONDENTS 55 AND OLDER

	Percentage		
	Employees (N=88)	Retirees (N=73)	Total (N=161)
No change since age 50. . .	50	52	51
Much less now	16	18	17
Somewhat less now	12	11	11
More now	2	1	2
Stopped completely after age 50	2	3	2
Stopped completely before age 50	1	1	1
Started after age 50 . . .	1	0	1
No answer to question . . .	1	3	2
Not applicable (never used)	15	11	13

TABLE 3: FREQUENCY OF CURRENT ALCOHOL USE BY DRINKING CONTEXTS AND CHANGES IN ALCOHOL USE SINCE AGE 50*

	Percentage			
	At least once weekly (N=44)	Once a month but less than once wkly. (N=53)	Less than once a month (N=57)	Current nonusers (N=29)
Situations in which respondent "usually" has a drink				
None	9	32	65	N/A
1 - 2	18	30	28	
3 - 4	39	23	7	
5 or more	34	15	-	
No answer	-	-	-	
Friends' use nearly every day				
All	5	2	0	0
Most	23	9	7	7
Several	18	8	9	17
One or two	9	26	26	21
None	9	15	35	21
Don't know	36	40	23	31
No answer	-	-	-	3
Friends' use at least twice a month				
All	18	7	0	0
Most	27	23	12	10
Several	21	19	12	24
One or two	5	21	25	14
None	2	-	12	17
Don't know	27	30	35	31
No answer	-	-	4	4
Changes in alcohol use since age 50 among current users 55-plus**				
No change since age 50	58	62	62	N/A
Less now	36	38	30	
More now	6	-	2	
Started after age 50	-	-	2	
No answer	-	-	4	

*Excludes four respondents who could not be classified as to frequency of current alcohol use.

**Excludes respondents under 55. Percentages are based on 36 respondents who drink at least once a week, 42 who drink once a month but less than once a week and 53 who drink less than once a month.

TABLE 4: FREQUENCY OF CURRENT ALCOHOL USE BY AGE, SEX, HEALTH AND LIFE SATISFACTION*

	Percentage			
	At least once weekly (N=44)	Once a month but less than once wkly. (N=53)	Less than once a month (N=57)	Current nonusers (N=29)
Age				
45-54	18	21	7	7
55-64	30	43	37	42
65-74	48	34	40	44
75-plus	4	2	11	7
No answer	-	-	5	-
Sex				
Male	39	25	10	10
Female	61	75	88	90
No answer	-	-	2	-
General Health				
Excellent	43	23	5	24
Good	36	49	63	45
Fair	21	28	32	31
Health compared with others'				
Better than average	55	41	31	34
About average	43	57	67	66
Worse than average	2	2	-	-
No answer	-	-	2	-
Frequency of health worries				
Often	2	6	7	7
Sometimes	46	49	56	55
Almost never	52	45	37	38
General life satisfaction				
Very satisfied	25	15	7	17
Satisfied	59	64	63	73
Somewhat dissatisfied	16	21	26	10
Can't answer	-	-	4	-

*Excludes four respondents who could not be classified as to frequency of current alcohol use.

TABLE 5: DRINKING SITUATIONS SCORE BY SELECTED VARIABLES

	Mean Score	F Value	Significance Level
Age			
Under 60	15.1		
60-69	12.5		
70 and over	11.2	3.3 with 2,151 d.f.	.05
Marital Status			
Married	13.8		
Widowed	11.5		
Other	20.0	1.8 with 2,154 d.f.	N.S.
Income			
Under $8,000	10.7		
$8,000 and over	14.5	3.3 with 1,151 d.f.	.05
Sex			
Male	16.4		
Female	11.7	3.6 with 1,154 d.f.	.05
Work Status			
Employed	14.1		
Retired	10.9	2.7 with 1,155 d.f.	N.S.
Health			
Excellent	17.2		
Good	21.1		
Fair	10.7	9.1 with 2,154 d.f.	.001